Holistic Education in Japan: A Gaijan’s (foreigner’s) Journey

By

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In 1993 I received a letter from a Professor in Japan indicating that he wanted to translate my book, *The Holistic Curriculum*. Professor Yoshida also came to Toronto in December of that year and he asked if I would be interested in coming to Japan to teach and conduct workshops that spring. I did go to Japan in the spring of 1994 where I taught at Kobe Shinwa Women’s University and conducted workshops in central and western Japan. *These events brought many changes in my life.* Since then I have traveled to Japan on almost a yearly basis to teach and work with holistic educators there. I would like to relate some of this journey and some of my observations regarding holistic education in Japan.

The Beginning.

On that first trip to Japan in 1994 I met several people who are still friends and colleagues today. I have already mentioned Professor Yoshida and who currently is President of the Japanese Society for Holistic Education and has written several books in the field. Recently he has been a leader in introducing Waldorf education and in the development of a Waldorf school in Kyoto. The school is the largest Waldorf school in Japan and Professor Yoshida has written a book about the school that should help in the development of Waldorf education in Japan.
Kohei Yamane who is now President at Shinwa also one of the people at the airport and was my main host in 1994 since I stayed and taught at his university. Kohei is a visionary educator who has had a long connection with my institution, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). He came as a visiting professor in the early 90’s and had fostered a strong connection between his university and OISE/UT. He has invited several other faculty and staff from OISE/UT and brings a group of about 20 students to visit schools in Toronto every fall. Kohei also embodies one of the qualities that so many Japanese have shown—generosity. He has hosted myself and many others from the North America and ensures that every guest is treated graciously with dinners, sightseeing, and trips to onsen (hot springs). During my first visit to Japan he also took me to Hiroshima to visit the museum there. He told me that his family lived near Hiroshima when the bomb exploded and that he was four months old. Kohei’s father helped with the rescue and clean-up operations after the bombing. Hiroshima has become a centre for peace and every August there is a memorial gathering there. Japan’s constitution includes a peace provision that only allows Japan to only develop a defense force. Prime Minister Abe recently announced that Japan will not develop nuclear weapons despite the threat of North Korea’s nuclear program.

As an administrator, Kohei has strongly supported initiatives in holistic including bringing me and my wife to Japan to teach courses in Holistic Education and Spirituality in Education over the past twelve years. The first year there I taught two classes and after the evening class several of the students would go out for a meal and drinks. I learned that the Japanese like more informal settings to discuss their work. I too have enjoyed
sitting on the floor around a table where the food is shared rather than people receiving individual portions. So much of Japanese life is designed to nurture community.

I also met my wife, Midori, that first year in Japan. She translated for me as I did workshops in Nagoya, Nagano, and Nagaoka. When she was translating for me, even though I do not understand Japanese, I intuitively felt that we were speaking with one voice. We were married in 2000 and one of the joys of my life is teaching with her in Japan. Midori also is very interested in holistic learning and she embodies many of the qualities and practices that I talk about such as being present and mindful. Student evaluations of our courses inevitably include comments on Midori’s translation and the positive atmosphere she helps create in the classroom.

As I mentioned, Midori was the translator for me in Nagaoka. Here I met one of the most passionate and dedicated holistic educators I have known anywhere: Giichiro Yamanouchi. In 1994 he has just retired after being principal in many schools in Japan. He brought me to the first school I visited there in the village of Ojiya. This school has been described in a book by Ikue Tezuka (1995) entitled School with Forest and Meadow. I still remember visiting that school as the children came forth and presented me with flowers. The school building surrounded an area where animals such as rabbits, chickens, goats, and turtles were kept and where the children fed and took care of the animals. Behind the school was a small forest with 290 trees planted by the children. The students planted and took care of these trees and also wrote poems about the trees.
**Trees in The Home Forest**

Yukari Kazama

I saw trees in the ground.
They are moving as if they were dancing with snow.
Don't they feel heavy
When they have snow on their branches?

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**Big Red Buds**

Rie Nagahashi

Big red buds on a small tree.
They look like candle lights, red candies, cherries, rubies
Big, red, pretty buds.
Nice buds.
They seem to say, "I'm pretty."
(pp. 9-10)

At Ojiya school students develop a bond with the animals and the trees so that they do not see themselves as separate from the environment. The curriculum in the school focused on activities that integrated these activities into the curriculum in a holistic manner. Yamanouchi believes that teachers’ most important responsibility is help children grow as human beings so that they can think for themselves and to treat others kindly and fairly.
Recently Yamanouchi won an award for his work and a day was held in honor in June 2004. Midori and I attended this day where former students and parents commented on the impact of having a small forest on the school grounds. One parent got up and talked about how an experience with his daughter at the school had a profound impact on him. One day he went with her to school to look at the tree she was taking care of. There was a small vine growing around the bottom of the tree and the father started to remove it. His daughter got upset and said: “Don’t do that! The vine and the tree are friends.” The father said that his daughter’s words hit him like a hammer and since that moment he has looked on the natural world in a different way. He said he is much more sensitive to the environment in his work in the construction industry and now encourages the tree planting. This comment moved me and is an example of the power of holistic education.

I have felt a strong connection to Yamanouchi because of his work to bring holistic education into public education which has been part of my work. On a personal note Yamanouchi was the Japanese equivalent of best man at our wedding reception in Japan.

Another friend and colleague that I met that year is Yoshi Nakagawa who currently is a professor at Ritsumeiken University in Kyoto. When I met Yoshi when he was an iterant professor teaching at different universities. After my trip in 1994 he came to OISE/UT to pursue a doctorate in education. His thesis became a book: Education for Awakening: An Eastern Approach to Holistic Education published in 2001 and in my view is one of the most important books in the field. As a professor at Ritsumeiken he hopes to build a center for holistic education and continues to be productive in writing
books on holistic education. Like Professor Yoshida he is one of the leaders in the Japanese Society for Holistic Education. Midori and I have also appreciated teaching at his university on several occasions.

**Teaching in Japan**

Since 1994 I have taught 15 courses in Holistic Education and Spirituality in Education at Kobe Shinwa Women’s University and Ritsumeiken University. Most of these courses have been at the graduate level but I have also taught a few courses at the undergraduate level. In teaching these courses I use the same framework that I use at OISE/UT. The courses focus on underlying theory, various teaching and curricular approaches and the importance of teaching presence in holistic learning. To facilitate the last aspect—teaching presence I ask students to do meditation practice.

Meditation can be important in how we approach teaching. If teaching is ego-based it can become a frustrating series of mini-battles with students. The classroom becomes focused around the issue of control. If we teach from a deeper self (e.g. our Buddha nature), teaching becomes a fulfilling and enriching experience. Robert Griffin (1977) summarizes this very well:

You do not feel set off against them [the students] or competitive with them. You see yourself in students and them in you. You move easily, are more relaxed, and seem less threatening to students. You are less compulsive, less rigid in your thoughts and actions.
You are not so tense. You do not seem to be in a grim win-or-lose contest when teaching (p. 79).

When we teach mostly from our egos, our work inevitably becomes tense and frustrating; conversely when we teach from our deeper self, or soul, our work can become an act of joy and delight. Teaching from this deeper place, we experience connections with our students and our colleagues. Meditation with its focus on the development of our deeper self rather than the ego can facilitate this process. The rationale for Self-based teaching has been explained in other contexts (Miller, 1993; Miller, 1994; Miller, 1995). I have also conducted research on the impact of meditation in teachers’ lives. (Miller & Nozawa, 2002; Miller & Nozawa, 2005)

The students do the meditation or other spiritual practices outside the class. In the class itself the chairs are arranged in a circle and I ask students to share their experiences in this format. One activity that I use is to describe person in their lives that they feel embodies spirituality. This is often quite moving as often students will describe someone in their own family. After the sharing is completed I ask them to list the qualities of these individuals and they often cite compassion, kindness, and the ability to listen deeply. I suggest that these are qualities that should be fostered in our schools instead of just focusing on solely on knowledge and skill acquisition if we truly want the world to be a better place.

There is of course some irony of coming to Japan and to have a Westerner introducing meditation to Japanese. However, I try to point out the connection between
meditation and Japanese contemplative practices such as the tea ceremony, flower arranging and calligraphy. Students are given a great deal of choice of what spiritual practice or meditation they pursue. Some chose to do meditation others kept gratitude journal where they write about things that they appreciate in their lives.

This last year (2006) I asked students at Shinwa to write about their spiritual practice and what they found valuable in the course. One Chinese student in the graduate class commented about the importance of teacher presence. She wrote: “Teaching is the most noble job under the sun. I believe the foundation of the country is education and education largely depends on the humanity and quality of the teachers. In short, that is the presence of the teacher. The teacher’s everyday behavior and words can have a huge impact on kids.”

Other students focused on being mindful in their work and life. One Japanese graduate student commented: “I am more aware of my reaction and try to be mindful. I can step back and try to accept what’s been said instead of reacting right away. I also try to invite what has been said to me into my thinking and also to reflect on my own thinking. Even scenery looks different now. When I look outside from the University building and see some flowers and grass they look so pretty and green and this makes me calm. When I walk, my feet touching the ground brings a sense of happiness. I believe that all these changes happened because of my spiritual practices.” A Chinese student also described the impact of mindfulness practice.

During this course I was offered a job as an interpreter for a group of Korean students. It was my first job as an interpreter and I was feeling
pretty nervous. Then I decided to practice mindfulness. This way I was able to spend those 10 days mindfully and things went smoothly. Interacting with students mindfully made me feel connected with them and we felt like one big family. What amazed me was that even through my work schedule was heavy from 9 in the morning till 9 at night, I did not feel exhausted or irritable. Being mindful helped to connect to my body and support me throughout the 10 days.

One of the students taught high school and she described how the practices made a difference in her classroom. In her reflections she refers to her kokoro. There is no direct translation into English with closest words being “heart” or “soul”. I found that the Japanese use this word more frequently than Westerners refer to soul or heart. This teacher wrote:

“The importance of the presence of the teacher is the things that remained in my kokoro the most. . . . By taking this course and doing spiritual practices everyday, I was able to feel the growing space in my kokoro and to face my students with a much warmer attitude. I also felt more grateful about things happening in my daily life. My own change affected my students in a positive way. My class is going much smoother and calmer and students were more engaged.”
The Japanese students that Midori and I have worked with are comfortable talking about their inner life as they often use rich imagery and metaphor to describe their kokoro.

**Summary Reflections**

In the past dozen years I have witnessed many developments in holistic education in Japan:

- The growth of the Japanese Society for Holistic Education. The society started in 1997 and has over 200 members of teachers, researchers, and parents. Every year it publishes a book that focuses on relevant topics such as Waldorf education in Japan, Violence and Peace, ESD (education for sustainable development). The society also provides workshops and symposiums in each year, and last year held the first conference on research in holistic education. Through publications, workshops and symposiums, this society has provided an important network for holistic educators in Japan.

- The publication of many books in the field by Japanese educators.

- The growth in Waldorf schooling. When I went in 94, there was one Waldorf kindergarten in Tokyo while now there are five schools with three more in the planning stages. Professor Atsuhioko Yoshida has provided important leadership in this area and has written a book on the Waldorf school in Kyoto.
Under the leadership of Professor Yoshiharu Nakagawa, Ritsumeiken University is becoming an academic centre for holistic education in Japan.

In contrast to these developments, the Japanese Ministry of Education, like many other government ministries, has become more conservative. In the 90’s there was an emphasis on creativity and individuality and just a few years ago the Ministry promoted integrated curriculum and the “spacious curriculum” that was not so content driven. However, with a concern for how Japanese student are performing on international tests they have recently focused on more traditional approaches to learning. This tension between grass roots developments in holistic education and government policies exists throughout the industrialized world. The future of holistic education will depend on how deeply the seeds of holistic learning take root that are being planted by people like Yamanouchi, Yoshida and Nakagawa. I find William James view of change relevant here:

I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big success, and I am for those tiny invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of man’s pride. (cited in Korten, p. 315)

Holistic Education can be seen of larger process that some have referred to as a global awakening (Tolle, 2005; Korten, 2006). Korten writes: “The momentum is building. Around the world people are organizing from the grass roots up to take back their
lives, reject calls to war and violence, rebuild their local economies, democratize their political institutions, and create authentic cultures” (p.356). Tolle focuses more on awakening consciousness when he writes: “We are in the midst of a momentous event in the evolution of human consciousness, but they won’t be talking about it in the news tonight. On our planet, and perhaps simultaneously in many parts of the of our galaxy and beyond, consciousness is awakening form the dream of form..” (p. 293). Tolle speaks of an “awakened doing” which bringing ourselves in harmony with the fundamental energies in the universe. Holistic education can be seen as part of this process which can also be viewed as reclaiming the ancient vision of wholeness. (Miller, 2006)

When I arrived at the airport in Osaka in 1994, Professor Yoshida presented me with the Japanese translation of *The Holistic Curriculum* and in the front of the book was the following inscription:

Dear John. Miller:

For the transformative relationship between

You and I,

Canada and Japan,

West and East,

and all living things on the earth

Translators

Atsuhiko Yoshida

Yoshiharu Nakagawa

Ikue Tezuka
April 21st, 1994

Osaka airport.

I can say that my journey as been deeply transformative for me and I hope for many of the people I have worked with in Japan. My own journey has been one of continual surprise and wonder. Emerson (1990) wrote that “the results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable.” (p.238). The Japanese speak of “en” or the mysterious relatedness of all things. Sometimes when we meet a person or go to place and we feel a strong connection or even a sense of mutual destiny. Japan and its people, then, have been a profound experience of en. Emerson wrote that “the way of life is wonderful, it is by abandonment” (p.200) To go to Japan I had to abandon myself, to let go, and thus I was able to experience some of the wonder that the universe offers us.

References


